Chapter one

EVERYTHING FOR THE TEAM

The opponent's goalkeeper is lying on the ground. The ball is caught by the net and bounces back out. The keeper had no chance. Sophie has scored again. Cold as ice. The Harriers Girls throw themselves over her in elation and roll across the turf in a pile of arms and legs.

“Yes! Superb! Absolutely superb!” Tom stretches two clenched fists in the air while his tummy jiggles a little victory dance under his way too small Harriers LFC sweatshirt. “Outstanding Sophie! You’re all doing totally brilliant, everyone!”

Everyone? Molly squirms. She is still sitting on the bench waiting for her turn. If only

Tom could forget that she exists. Unfortunately, he always makes sure that everyone gets a game. The time is passing by so incredibly slowly. Soon he will point at her, and Molly knows what that means. She has to run out onto the pitch.

“We’ve got this. We have them!” shouts Tom before sitting down heavily on the bench next to Molly. She reaches down to her shin guards and pretends to straighten them out. In fact the shin guards aren’t bothering her so much any more. Right now it’s that horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach that is welling up more intensely than ever.

Sophie is the STAR PLAYER in capital letters. It’s as if she had an upgrade over the summer, and is now a slicker, newer version of herself. She certainly isn’t good old Sof anymore. She is like a stranger. Molly noticed those long legs had stretched even further, but it’s not really about the recognisable changes on the outside. There are signs that she is now different on the inside too. Sof’s favourite jeans and jumpers have been replaced with athletic gear. That wild, sun-bleached hair is now tied back into a practical ponytail. It is only her bright blue eyes remain the same. That same intense look which makes people think she must use coloured lenses. Molly knows it’s not that. Those are baby blue eyes that have never changed. Molly has heard Sophie's parents tell the story many times. The world's bluest eyes, that became dark creases whenever Sof would laugh out loud at the silly costumes, or comics they made together. That and the terrible jokes Molly learnt from her dad. That’s was *laughed.* Sophie never laughs now. At least not with Molly anymore.

Molly pulls hard on the hairband around her ponytail until it’s as tight as the knot inside her. Sophie strides across the artificial turf towards the center line and back into position. She really is a spectacle. The scene could have been taken from a music video. She looks so perfect.

Even Amal and Hannah are giving Sophie high fives as the referee’s whistle blows to restart the game. This is the same Amal and Hannah who were already into make-up and Snapchat while Sof and Molly were still building tree houses, drawing, listening to music on Molly's cardboard speaker and munching sweets. But that was all before the holidays. Before Sof was updated. Now a family of birds live in the tree house and Sophie never talks about their next comic at break times. Not anymore. Instead Sophie only talks loudly to Amal and Hannah about football players, tactics, matches, teams and how unhealthy sugar is. Amal and Hannah have also made a complete U-turn. These days they hang onto Sophie’s every word. Obviously she is no longer *too immature* to hang out with them.

And football?! Football was what Mikey and his pals did. Mikey, Mum and Dad were forever watching it on TV. Football made them stamp crisps into the floor, and scream and holler like their lives depended on it. All over the house are reminders of their sacred United. The Red Devils. Every holiday had to be coordinated with whatever was happening at Old Trafford. It’s like this team that Mum and Dad chose as kids, is the most important member of the family. Or at least it’s important to a part of the family. Molly could cope with football when her and Sof had their own thing. While the others shrieked and went crazy in front of the TV, Molly and Sof sat in her bedroom drawing comic strips until they ran out of paper. Until it suddenly ended.

So what happened? Summer happened. The Harriers girls team started along with football training and matches like the one being played in front of her right now.

At first Molly thought it wouldn’t be that difficult. How hard could it be to run around after a ball? If Mikey could manage that, then it must be pretty easy. Then there was Mum. As a youngster, she had played for the national side in two internationals, before a knee injury ended her career.

Molly turned up at her first training session full of anticipation with her brand new football boots, shin pads and Mum and Dad’s enthusiastic support. This should be simple. Sof and her, still BFFs. Best Friends Forever at school, at home and on the pitch. Molly could easily endure a little football if she had to. It might even be fun. Maybe she’d been missing out all these years? But all those thoughts were before Molly realised the ball wasn’t only rolling on the ground. Sometimes it flew high through the air, like a cannonball. That’s when Molly's job was to knock it away with her head. If that wasn’t bad enough, there was so much running about too. It was tiring. There were all these new rules to remember, like throwing the ball with two feet on the ground, and offside. It was complicated.

If only Sophie could simply acknowledge that Molly was even there, that would make it okay. To know that despite everything, they had, and always would be, best friends. It hasn’t happened though, and now Molly wishes she had never started training. She might have brand new football boots, but her heart will never belong to football. There are no teams she wants to support until the day she dies. She should have known. How could she have been so stupid? To believe that Sof would come back to her, just by joining the football team.

Tom rubs his hands over his knees and lets out a grunt before collapsing heavily on the bench. Molly swallows hard, fills both fists with granules from the artificial turf and squeezes them hard together. Soon it will be time. Tom checks his watch, as Molly lets the granules run between her fingers like an hourglass. Somewhere she read they were made of old car tires. That artificial grass is a micro-plastic and damaging to the environment. She is sure that both the granules and football will destroy her future.

That rumbling sound is getting louder. Molly turns around to look this time, and that’s when she sees them: A gang of skateboarders are rolling along the road beside the football pitch.

“Molly, concentrate on the game!” Tom slaps Molly hard on the shoulder. “Sophie is tired now. She gave us her all. You'll be on soon.”

And *that* is the signal.

Molly pulls her socks up over the shin guards before taking another look at the skaters. They cruise down the hill before disappearing around the corner of the street. How amazing it must feel to simply glide away like that.

“Molly!” Tom raises his voice, clearly annoyed. He’s already started, *before* she has even done anything. ”Focus! This substitution is happening now. Remember: Everything for the team!” He says while pounding his chest.

Molly staggers to her feet as the small, black granules run down her lap. Her stomach hurts. She brushes off her shorts as Sophie jogs up to the bench. Molly extends her arm to ready for a high five, just like Tom insists they do. *So important to build team camaraderie.* It probably looks friendly, as if their palms are hitting each other, but what Tom doesn’t know is that Sophie always pulls her hand away just before, so they don’t connect at all. That’s because Sof is now Sophie, the star player. Molly is the talentless, invisible zero in the expensive boots.

Chapter two

WIN OR LOSE

“How was the match?” Dad is burning fish fingers in a spitting hot frying pan. He is still dressed in his dark blue suit trousers and shirt. His tie dangles dangerously close to the frying pan, as he risks serving freshly fried silk together with the charcoal-fried fish fingers.

“We lost.” Mumbles Molly.

Of course, it all happened after Sophie left the game and Molly took to the pitch.

“Buy two goals.”

There was no doubt at all, who everyone blamed. And they were right. It was Molly's fault that they lost those goals. She hadn’t been paying attention when the goalkeeper’s pass was intercepted by the opposition. Her legs couldn’t move quickly enough during the counterattacks. Then there was that time when she had to head the ball.

They didn't even have to say it out loud. Everyone understood.

Molly throws her water bottle into the sink. Why does Tom even bother playing her, if winning is so important? He should have known how it would end.

“The result?” Continues Dad.

The result? Come on, does he have to rub it in?

“Two to Four. Everyone was totally fuming. Now we need to win the away match. Otherwise they’re ..., I mean we’re, out the cup.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes you win, sometimes … not so much.” Dad makes a crooked smile smiles and tries to continue the small talk. “Was it fun?”

Fun? Is it fun to be the weakest link? Tom used those words after the match. That no team is ever better than the weakest link in its chain. In other words the worst player, namely Molly.

“It will work out,” says Dad. “I’m sure you’ll go further in the cup. You’ve got Sophie. Now that is real talent. When that girl is on the ball, she is on fire.”

“Yeah, but when I go on, the match goes down in flames.” says Molly.

“Ha good one!” Dad laughs. “Okay let’s forget Sophie for a minute, what about your own performance today Molly? Are you happy?”

Molly does not answer. Why should she? She has had this conversation before.

“Molly!” Repeats Dad. “Answer me when I ask you something.”

Molly groans.

“Why do you even bother asking?” She hears a tremble in her voice. “You know what I think. I was rubbish! Clumsy with the ball and useless on the pitch. I’m just ruining it for everyone else and getting in the way. Everybody knows it.”

“Whoah! Hold on there!” Dad sighs. “Finally, there is a girls team up and running. This is historical. Something the local women have been working towards for a long time. You know you’re lucky? Having it served to you on a silver platter. Look, my fondest childhood memories are from kicking a ball around. The same goes for your Mum. We’re a football family! Think how much fun Mikey has on his club trips. The training keeps you fit, and then there is the excitement of competing. Feeling that team spirit through all the ups and the downs together. You know a team sticks …"

“Stop it!” Molly interrupts.

Dad doesn’t understand anything at all. Molly doesn’t fit in, and she is never will. She doesn’t love The Red Devils, and doesn’t want her ashes scattered in a football stadium. The only thing Molly wants is for everything to go back to the way it was before.

Dad stands in front of her, puts his hands on her shoulders, and looks into her eyes.

“In the long run, you will love it. Football is in your genes. It is fantastic, really, everyone loves it.”

“Everyone, except me.” says Molly and shrugs him off.

“You have to give this a proper chance Molly.” Dad continues.

“That's exactly what I am doing” Molly adds. “But I’m just no good at it and I do not like it.”

Dad lifts the smoking frying pan over to the sink. He lets the water run until the pan stops sizzling. Obviously he is trying to appear busy with something else. He always uses that trick whenever he is looking for the right words or trying to cover up what he really feels. He waits until the sizzling stops.

“You said the same thing about ballet.” His words sting. “And gymnastics, and netball, and ice-skating and skiing. My God, Molly! Our shed is stuffed full of your equipment. I would not dare to guess how much money has been wasted on you over the years.”

“But all those things were a long time ago.”

“Long ago? Those ballet classes only happened this spring. Your ballet shoes still smell new.”

“Okay, not the ballet then.” Molly's voice is fragile. “I couldn’t take all those rapid fire instructions in that thick accent! And our dance instructor must have been the strictest teacher in the whole of Russia. Would you stand there being yelled at every time one of your pirouettes had the slightest wobble? Also that is gross, when did you start smelling my shoes?”

Dad turns towards her with a long sigh.

“I was just making a point, and Petrovska is from the Ukraine,” he says. “Okay, forget the ballet. Right now we are talking about football. So many girls from your school year joined that team, it should be great fun.”

Great fun? Seriously? Dad must be crazy!

“You were the one who asked to start playing football, remember?” Dad continues, now with a calmer voice now. “Also there’s Sophie. Spending so much time with your best friend again, must count for something. Isn’t that what you dreamed about all this summer?”

“I suppose.” Molly Mumbles.

“Tell you what. At the next match, me or your Mum will come to show our support. I’m really looking forward to watching you play. You know, I really am so proud of you. Do you know?”

“Dad …"

“The most important thing is to simply to make an effort. Show everyone that you’re trying. You can only do your best.”

“Please don’t come.” says Molly. “I don’t want any audience. Also, you have to open the windows, because it stinks of smoke in here!”

The stairs up to Molly’s bedroom creak and groan with every step. Along the wall hang the family photos. Every step feels like a journey back to another time. Mum standing together with the national team. Mum and Dad back when they were young and in love, with their football scarves held high. Mikey missing his front teeth standing proudly in his first football strip. An image of Molly and Sophie as toddlers in muddy waterproofs and wellies. At the top hangs a picture of the tree house taken on the day it was finished. Sophie and Molly with their hands full of colouring pencils, pens and comics. Molly forces herself to look the other way as she passes the rest of the photo wall.

Chapter three

THE DRAWING COURSE

The outside world is shut behind the bedroom door. Finally Molly can unwind, slowly breathe out and be herself. Here anime posters hang on the walls to greet her. As usual, her faithful old teddy bears sit on the shelf welcoming her home with their kind smiles and shining eyes. Those teddies are probably the only friends that haven’t yet changed their minds about her. Molly sits down nest to her desk. Copic marker pens are scattered across the surface. She finds them so incredibly satisfying to draw with. A fine tip at one end, and a thick felt-tip pen at the other. Those really were expensive. Molly always makes sure that the tops click down properly when she is done, and always tells Sophie to do the same. It is especially important with their favourite colours, pink and turquoise.

Actually, it was Sophie's job to colour in the drawings for their “Tree House Girls" comic. That was how it was. Molly sketched and drew, Sof coloured it in. Molly drew at least a whole page, every single night throughout the holidays. Now colour is the only thing missing from the summer edition of their comic. Visiting Mum’s crazy relatives down in Cornwall gave Molly so many great ideas for jokes and wild storylines for The Tree House Girls. Those strange old aunts told the most incredible tales while they fixed everyone dinner. It was as if their lives had been full of adventure, with each trying to outdo the other with the most improbable and exciting details.

Molly was so looking forward to showing her drawings to Sof! This comic was going to be the best yet. Molly had even asked Mum if they could invite Sof down to Cornwall for the next time, so that she too could experience all the crazy relatives.

Molly picks up a turquoise marker. Sophie's favourite colour. The one she used to colour in the most important parts. That was her style. It takes a few moments before Molly notices that she is just sitting there staring at the turquoise tip. With a hard push, she hears the top click into place and puts the pen back down. She grabs a purple felt-tip and starts colouring in the jeans, one of the characters is wearing. This is the cartoon version of Sof. If Sophie can’t be here to colour her own character, then she has no right to decide what colour her trousers are going to be.

Molly had never imagined, that while she had been drawing and planning her next holiday with Sof, Sophie and those other girls had bought football boots and started training. They even chose Premier League teams to support and talked about following “to the grave.” Molly can still remember Sophie and her, mocking Mum and Dad for being just like that. Now everything was about football. Molly had never thought that Sof would sideline her so quickly and totally for a sport. It was like becoming an ex-boyfriend. By the time Molly was back to school, it was already too late.

Molly presses her lips into an angry pout. Yuck. Purple looks ugly! She should never have used such a dark shade. She hasn’t coloured into to the edges as carefully as Sophie would either. Now there is colour bleeding outside the outlines in several places. Molly pushes the paper away and reaches for her iPad. Maybe they’ve answered now. It was about time that she had some good news. She taps and waits for the inbox to update. Look! At last, the email she's been waiting for is finally in her inbox. This is the answer from the drawing course she applied to.

*Congratulations! You have advanced ...*

*We would like you to send us …*

*Four ... All drawings must be scanned ...*

*PDF ... The deadline is ... Please reply within ...*

*if you want to keep your application open …*

Molly scrolls downwards. There is a lot of text, but the most important thing was the first word. Congratulations! She did it! It is almost unbelievable! She is in! She got a place! Molly’s door bursts open. She runs down the stairs shouting.

“Mum! Dad! I got in!”

“What really? That is absolutely fantastic!” says Dad. “The drawing course? Let’s see!”

Molly hands Dad the iPad.

“This is so exciting!” says Mum, who reads over Dad's shoulder.

“I probably won’t have time for football now.” Molly says somewhat hopefully.

Dad lowers the iPad and looks up.

“Your Mum and I have been talking about that.” he says. “You can’t give up so quickly this time. We can’t let you quit until you give football a real chance. We have discussed it already. It’s one thing to quit if you’re doing something on your own, but if you’re part of a team …” his voice is serious. “And this isn’t any old team. This girls team must depend on every one of their players. We want you to at least play until the end of the season and try it properly. Those are our conditions if you want us to pay towards your drawing course.”

Molly stares with her mouth hanging open.

“But I’ve been dreaming about this drawing course since January!”

“Then you will just have to use that as your motivation and make a proper effort to keep on playing football.” says Mum.

“Do you even know how much we pay the football club for training fees?” adds Dad. “Not to mention what we’ve already spent on your equipment. Those weren’t exactly the cheapest football boots …"

“But the drawings-curse …”

Her words crash together. Instead of rolling off her tongue as normal, they are stuck together, like a traffic jam after an accident.

“We can’t let you just sit around drawing all day either. You should be more active. Your brain and your body need it. If you can divert some of your energy towards football, we will treat you to the whole drawing course. If not …" Dad lets the ending hang in the air.

Molly still can't speak. Drawing and Molly belong together. They always have done. Especially now that she doesn’t even have Sof any longer. Molly swallows hard. It was actually Sof's mum who mentioned the advert for the drawing course. How could Dad take away the only thing she had to look forward to?

“It says here, you need to submit drawings of people in motion. Why football would be perfect! Then you can beat two birds with one stone. You can be active, and do your drawing. Smart, right?”

“How do you mean?”

Dad looks at Molly for a long time.

“Didn’t you read the whole email? ⟪Congratulations. You have advanced ... to the second round.⟫ The course only has ten placements. You need to submit drawings that show a range of styles. Amongst other subjects, you will draw people in motion. They will then select the most promising candidates. It isn’t even certain that you will get a place on this course.”

Chapter four

THE SCHOOL ROAD

Molly lifts up Mikey's old jacket from its hook in the hallway. The only good thing about having a big brother are the hand-me-down clothes. Always comfy, slightly big, and worn in just the right amount.

“Have a great day, Molly!” shouts Mum. “Enjoy your training this afternoon.”

“Har-ri-ers! Har-ri-ers! Har-ri-ers!” chants Dad.

Molly doesn’t answer. She ties her shoelaces in short angry bursts. Can't they just stop it with all their encouragement? Don’t they understand they’re only making things worse? Imagine, just to be allowed to take a drawing course, they are forcing her to play football, while still complaining that she quits everything and never wants to try something new. Well here is something she really wants to do for once, and not just a little bit. She really WANTS this drawing course. How could anyone know their own child so badly?

Although it is the end of September, the leaves on the tallest garden tree are still green. Last year, Molly and Sof would have cheered about it, vowing to spend every afternoon tinkering with their tree house. Molly hasn’t been up there since she came home from Cornwall. Between the branches, are the sounds of birds. Dad had told her not to disturb the birds until they all flew south for winter. Absolutely typical! Everything Molly likes is stolen from her. Everything that was hers is now being ruined by others completely oblivious, tweeting about and enjoying themselves.

Molly fixes her gaze into the distance as she approaches Sophie's house. She holds her breath as she walks by the gate. Not until she has passed around the garden corner does she catch her breath. She gives the garden the briefest of glimpses. The trampoline has been moved to one side, making way for a small football goal. The kind used for shooting practice. Then she hears the sound of the front door opening and quick footsteps on the gravel.

“Molly, wait!”

She can feel her face forming a frown. Molly has no choice but to stop, because she knows that voice. There is no doubt that the person calling to her was ...

“New week, new opportunities!” calls out Sophie’s mum. “Sophie said that you had left already, but here you are!”

Molly forces a smile. It stiffens on her face.

“Yeah, I thought that Sophie must have already left.”

Sophie's mum had always been one of Molly's favourite adults. All her life up until now, Molly could come and go as she pleased, as if she was part of the family.

Then just behind the Sophie’s mum, she sees Sophie.

“It’s so nice seeing you again Molly. It has been so long!”

Sophie's mother flashes the sweetest, whitest smile, pulls up her coat sleeve and glances at her watch, which looks like a piece of jewellery.

“There is still fifteen minutes until the bell rings. You said Sophie!” Sophie's mother laughs. “Have you stopped saying Sof? Oh well! You are getting older! Soon it will soon be, social media and hair straighteners. Before we know it, I’ll be collecting you in the middle of the night from parties across the town.”

Molly manages a polite laugh.

“I'm kidding!” Sophie's mother continues. “I won’t embarrass you. Anyway, you two are not those kind of girls. You are athletes! Real footballers! Sophie has been telling me all about the benefits of exercise and nutrition, AND the new football kits you’re going to be buying. It will do so much for the team. Everyone’s confidence will get a boost with the new matching strips. You will all appear so much more professional. Not to mention how fabulous you will look on Insta! Hmm?” She ruffles Sophie and Molly's hair at the same time. “You girls really deserve it after all the time and effort you are investing. A little volunteer work selling cookies, then the Harriers Girls team will look like the winners that you truly are. At least that's what Sophie says!” her mother laughs and gets into her yellow Tesla.

As if the afternoons Molly spent at training wasn’t enough, now they had to spend even more free time selling cookies to raise money for football strips? The last thing Molly wants is a shirt with her name on her back. As far as this team goes, she would rather be invisible. Who wants to buy box loads of cookies? They’re full of sugar, anyway!

“Very good girls!” Sophie's mother sings like she is addressing two puppies. “Have a brilliant Monday! Oh! Don’t look so serious! she continues, before slamming the car door shut and rolling away.

As soon as the car is out of sight, Sophie start to walk quickly. It is like Molly has a disease and Sophie is terrified of being infected. Without saying a word, Molly slows her pace, allowing the distance between her and Sophie to open up. She stares at the ponytail in front swinging hard from side to side. To think that just a few months ago, they were best friends. It is almost unbelievable.

Hannah, Amal, and the others are standing just inside the school gates doing football tricks when Sophie, and Molly lagging behind, enter the school grounds.

“Hey, Sophie!”

Sophie lights up as if she has been awakened from sleep mode. Throwing off her backpack, she uses her hands to gesture for the ball. Immediately a quick pass in heading in her direction. Sophie expertly takes the speed off the ball with her first touch, then flicks the ball onto her chest, before bouncing it off one knee, and onto the other. Finally, she sends the ball back to Hannah in a precisely controlled lob, to wild cheers from the others.

“Do you want to join us for a game of one-bounce, Molly?”

Molly stops.

“No thanks.” she mumbles.

She hates one-bounce. The ball is only allowed to bounce once on the ground, before being kicked, or headed onwards. If there's one thing Molly really can’t stand, it's heading the ball.

There is the sound of applause signalling that Sophie has performed one more display of footballing magic, but Molly doesn’t turn around. Instead, she hurries towards the main entrance, where the Fortnight boys are standing like statues with their eyes and mouths wide open. Even they think Sophie and her tricks are fantastic.

Chapter five

FIFA

Heavy raindrops explode on the ground and windowsill as Molly opens the front door. Her jeans are soaked through and clinging to her skin. The water from her jacket drips all over the wooden floor. Molly half stamps, half kicks off her squishy Converse while carefully putting down her backpack. The bag is just as crammed full with cookie boxes now, as it was when she left home. She should have known it was madness trying to sell cookies now. Most adults aren’t home from work yet.

Whoever invented autumn should be fired.

This weather matches how she feels. Dreadful weather, dreadful morning, dreadful day at school, dreadful cookies, and now she is dreading another dreadful training session on that dreadful football pitch. Molly stops to look at the pile of jackets, bags and shoes that are littering the hallway as if a tornado had just passed through. Nearly everything she sees is covered in the logos of stupid football teams. She should have figured it out. The house is going to be full of noisy, smelly teenage boys. Today totally sucks! Could it get any worse?

Molly takes the stairs to her room and changes into dry clothes for football training. On the way to the wardrobe, she stumbles over a plastic box on the floor. Her childhood dressing-up box. Lying on top is a small pile of new clothes bought from a market in Cornwall. She cringes with embarrassment, to think she had been so looking forward to showing these clothes to Sof. Molly gives the box a kick. She clutches her toes and lets out a moan before limping down the stairs.

In the kitchen, Molly puts some yellow cheese between two slices of bread and squirts on some ketchup. She presses on the lid of the sandwich toaster and sits down at the table. Finally some free time to draw. Only ten places on the drawing course? And some of the drawings need to be people in motion. Should she really go with Dad’s suggestion and draw football players? She sits there, but can’t get her drawing hand to move. In fact, it hasn’t wanted to draw for a long time.

Her mind is unable to find peace. Even though the door to Mikey's room is closed, it is impossible not to become distracted by those loud outbursts of laughter and howling. Molly concentrates and draws the outline of a ball. Even drawing a smooth circle is hopeless. She groans. Why do they have to howl like that, every time they play FIFA? She's seen them. They will be almost sitting on each other. Every attempt on goal, call for a penalty, or actual goal, guarantees a loud roar followed by a round of laughter and swearing. Molly grabs her earphones and begins searching for a playlist to help her mind focus. No way is she going to listen to that playlist she made with Sof. The last time she heard it, everything felt worse, but still, she isn’t ready to delete it. It would be like deleting any hope that her and Sophie could be best friends again.

In a matter of seconds, her head is filled with music.

Molly closes her eyes and immerses herself in the soundtrack from the Ghibli movie about Totoro. Music does the trick. Behold, her blue sketching pencil starts to glide over the paper. First slow and deliberate, then faster and freely like it has a mind of its own. Soon the blank page is full of lines and shapes.

Molly flinches when someone pulls at her earphones.

“Leave the sandwich toaster on.” says Mikey. “The guys are hungry.”

The air is thick with the smell of burning toast and melted cheese. The toast! She had been so focused on her drawing, she had forgotten about everything else. Hope it’s not too burnt.

Molly removes the scorching hot sandwich using her finger tips.

“What’s that?” Mikey says while looking down at the open drawing pad.

“Nothing.”

Sweaty boys with gangly arms and legs push each other into the kitchen.

Molly looks down at her sketch. For the first time in ages, she had the pencil flowing around the page without really thinking about it. She sees is the beginning of something. It is a person in motion, but not a football player. It is strange how the brain works sometimes.

Mikey smirks.

“You hot for some skater guy, or?”

Idiot! Why does he always have to be such a creep?

“No! I don’t fancy anyone!”

With quick hard strokes, Molly begins colouring in, even though she knows it will ruin her drawing. Whenever she colours in, and hasn’t traced over her sketch lines with a thicker pen, it looks messy. That doesn’t stop her. Long brown hair tumbles down the shoulders of her skateboarder.

“It's a girl.”

“Seriously?” Mikey snorts. “A girl who skates? That doesn’t even happen!”

“Of course girls skate.” says Molly.

“Then they’re not very good.” Dylan opens the refrigerator door as if he is part of the family. “Only little girls rolling about on plastic Penny boards,” he sniggers and draws his feet together and waves his arms around pretending to struggle with his balance.

All the boys whoop in amusement.

“Girls with skateboards are such a bunch of posers. They’re only after likes for their clothes on Instagram” says Mikey. “Trying to be all alternative and trendy. They don’t really skate. It's a fashion trend using skateboards like handbags, or carrying around tiny dogs in their purses. Accessories!”

The boys laugh again.

“All the big skateboard pros are men,” continues Dylan. “Girls don’t have the balls. That's what's wrong with all of you.”

“Well to be fair, some women have shown guts to become prime ministers.” Lucas says.

“What I’m saying is that girls are never that into it. They can never commit to it enough to become properly good. At least not those tricks where they risk taking a hard slam.”

Dylan drinks straight from the orange juice carton, before giving Lucas a shove.

“Girls don’t have the same muscle mass either.”

Mikey flexes his biceps to try and illustrate his point, before grabbing the carton from Lucas.

“You don’t need big muscles to roll along on a skateboard.” says Molly.

Mikey smiles.

“Okay! Name me one professional woman skateboarder!”

Molly chews her bottom lip. She doesn’t have any names. Right now, she so wants to grab Mikey and scratch that smug grin off his face, but showing her anger would only make him even more smug. If that was possible.

“Yeah well, since when have you been such a big expert on skateboarding?”

The laughter from the others makes Molly sink back deeper into her chair.

“Lets see” says Mikey and pointing at the drawing. “For a start, I know that skateboards don’t look like that! The tail should be longer than the nose.”

“The noise?”

Laughter from the boys again.

“The nose, you fool! In front of the board, they have a nose and a tail, then the wheels go on the ... Yeah Molly, what do you call the part where the wheels go?”

Mikey was getting a sick kind of pleasure from exposing her ignorance. Molly glares hard at her brother and the silence stretches across the kitchen. If only he had the tiniest clue of how much she hates him right now. If only she was the one with the big muscles!

Muscles big enough to push Mikey right across the room and straight through that wall.

“Yes I do … The wheels are attached to ... The axels. See!”

Mikey pulls an ugly grin.

“They’re called trucks,” Lucas corrects.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Mikey. “The point is, Molly is completely clueless. It's like playing football without understanding the offside rule. You can't explain that either, can you Molly?”

“No girl really understands how offside works,” says Dylan.

Molly scribbles wildly all over her drawing, snaps the sketchbook shut and suddenly stands up. Of course only a bully like Mikey would have such losers for friends. She picks up her toast, then pushes herself through the grinning, wall of stinky boys and out of the kitchen. In the hallway, she swings her training bag over her shoulder and slams the front door on the way out.

Chewing hard, Molly forces herself to swallow the burnt toast while staring down at the pavement.

In the kitchen, the fresh toast and melted cheese had smelled so yummy. Her charred sandwich tasted disgusting. Mikey is such a creep! Him and Sophie think they’re so fantastic just because they know the offside rule and can play one-bounce. Like whatever they do is so amazing and so important that the whole world must depend on it.

Quickening her steps, Molly crosses the road. Football. The training bag rubs against her hip. She makes it to the next street, where the gardens have perfectly trimmed hedges and the lawns all look like putting greens. She feels an urge to throw her bag under a hedge. It could just rot away there throughout the autumn and winter, until a fox or a badger chews it to pieces. Wouldn’t that feel amazing? Then she remembers the drawing course …

Molly walks around the bend and passes the local shop and the school. The main road is busy with traffic, but at least it hasn’t rained since she left home. That’s something at least.

With the sun shining down, the road is drying up. “Girls are never that into it. They can never commit to it enough.” Dylan’s words turn over inside her head, making everything worse.

She had hoped the walk would help to ease her anger. From the end of the street, she starts to make out the football grounds. The very sight of the goal posts makes her legs feel a thousand times heavier. Bracing herself for two hours of suffering, she tries to concentrate on the future. In one hundred and twenty minutes or so, she can escape back home. Home to her bedroom, where she be alone again, listen to music and put her pens to paper. It’s been so long since her drawing gave her that sense of satisfaction and enjoyment. She needed to get those feelings back. But what happens if she doesn’t get a placement on the drawing course? What would be the point in forcing her through a whole autumn of football training?

Molly is about to cross over at the traffic lights when she hears that sound again and snorts. The sound of rolling wheels. Rolling down the street is a skateboarder dressed in a white, baggy T-shirt, black shorts and knee-high socks. White socks with red and blue stripes at the top. Molly will get those details right the next time she puts a pen to paper. Now she is absolutely certain what she's going to draw, and it’s not football players. No one else will be using skateboarders as their subject matter for people in motion. That way, her work is bound to stand out. But… Molly blinks her eyes, as if to reassure herself that what she is seeing is true: The person on the skateboard … It is a girl!

Pushing to pick up speed across the road, the girl approaches the curb and a small puddle of rainwater, then “snap” her feet tilt the board up and into the air. The board flies over the puddle in an elegant arc, and with all the skill of a professional footballer, she steers the skateboard around in mid air with her feet. She lands on the board rolling with her legs positioned backwards now. It is wildly impressive, and how cool she looks! Molly wishes she had the trick captured on film. Her heart pounds as she starts to run after the skater. She has to see more! To remember all the details so the drawings will be correct. This is the first really good idea that has popped into her head for a long, long time.

Chapter six

THE SKATEPARK

Finally the girl hops off her board and stops. Molly catches her breath. It has been a long time since she ran so fast, or so far. The skater steps onto the end of the skateboard, so that it bounces up in the air. The next second the board is in her hand. It looks so simple and stylish. Maybe it’s possible to draw that movement?

Molly looks around. They are in the parking lot between some old industrial buildings, behind the training grounds. Nearby there is a large cash and carry, a DIY superstore, warehouses and some containers. Molly has been here before with Mum and Dad. Whenever they had to buy a lot of food or paint, they would drive here instead of going to their usual shop.

The girl opens a battered old metal door with peeling paint. The skater disappears and the door slams shut. Molly jolts as if suddenly waking up. She looks down at the training bag. Football training. Now she’s going to be late, and there is nothing she can do about it. Molly has to follow the girl. Quickly she strides towards the metal door. There is a sign stuck to it:

SKATEPARK.

ALL ACTIVITY AT YOUR OWN RISK.

At the bottom is a lot of small print.

She feels a throbbing in her temples. Molly grips the door handle but hesitates. Can she really just go inside? Shouldn't she ask someone if it's okay?

The sound of rumbling wheels makes her turn again. Another girl skater rolls up. What is it with girls and skating? Now Molly has seen TWO! This one has short hair and a ring in her nose. She is dressed in a wide, gray sweatshirt and is probably a few years older than Molly.

The skater slows to a stop using the bottom of her shoe, then pings the board up into the air and grabs it exactly like the first girl. She smiles at Molly.

“Hey!” she says. “Are you here for the sesh?”

*Sesh?* Molly is unable to answer. Instead, she stands there gaping like an idiot, until she remembers to close her mouth.

“Welcome to Girl Skate.” says the girl, and pulls on the door handle, holding it open for Molly.

“What's your name?”

“Ehm ... Molly.”

Molly's voice comes out like a whisper.

She clears her throat and repeats it. This time with more power.

“ Hi! I’m … Molly.”

“Cool! Rhymes with Ollie. Perfect for a skater.” The girl smiles. “I’m Danni,” she says while

pounding her knuckles against Molly's hand.

The old metal door is like a gateway to a secret club. Stepping up and over the threshold, Molly is stuck by the smell of newly sawn wood. Her gaze wanders all around the huge room. It must have been an old garage or a car wash, with high ceilings and a floor made of gray concrete. The smell reminds her of woodwork classes at school. Ramps and platforms of various sizes are scattered all over. A brick wall is covered with colourful graffiti. Beat up skateboards and photos of skateboarders are hanging on the walls like decorations. Beside what could be a reception counter is a tattered old sofa. Leaning on the fraying green fabric is the girl from the traffic lights tying her shoe laces. Here are the details Molly has been looking for, to breathe life into her drawings. And then it dawns on her: It’s incredible. There are ONLY GIRLS in here! No plastic Penny boards, No handbags or tiny dogs in their purses. Wait until Mikey hears about this!

Danni pats Molly on the shoulder.

“Hey, Ollie-Molly. Have you skated before?”

Molly smiles and shakes her head, before glancing at her mobile. The warm up at football training must have begun. Tom is going to be so angry with her. Still, she stays put.

“Girl Skate is a free session,” Danni continues. “Three hours are reserved for us girls on Mondays.”

“So cool,” Molly smiles. “But I don’t think skateboarding is for me. I like watching though.”

“We’re not that all that down for just *watching*,” says Danni. “Here, you can borrow a board and helmet. Come on, I'll show you.”

Molly puts down her training bag. The girl didn’t say “can" like it was a choice, it was more like “you ought to" borrow a board. Molly has never been on any kind of board before, not a snowboard, surfboard or a skateboard. This is going to be just like football. No one will want to talk to her once they see how terrible she is. All the same, to get the details right in her drawings, maybe she should at least try it. To feel how the body actually moves. Everything will look more realistic then. Besides: No one is going to miss her at training anyway, so what difference does it make if she is a little bit later?

“Ready?” Danni asks.

“But I can’t do anything.”

Danni tilts her head and smiles.

“Then you’ve got so much to look forward to, what with everything you’re about to learn.”

Something about Danni’s face makes Molly give in. She can’t remember the last time she saw such a look of encouragement.

“Um … I could try,” she says hesitating to follow Danni over to the counter.

The girl behind the reception hands Molly a neon yellow helmet.

“See if this one feels good,” she says. “Then we can find you a board the right size.”

Size? Do boards come in different *sizes?*

“I reckon 8.25 will be too big. I think maybe an eight? Actually, 7.75 would be perfect for you, but it’s better to begin with something slightly bigger the first few times. It will be more stable. Do you like street or transitions?”

Molly tries to look like she is following what the girl is saying. She doesn’t want to show how clueless she really is.

“Okay, any preference with wheels? Hardness, diameter? Brands?”

“Just that they're attached to the ... tru …” Molly stops and swallows the end of the word. “ ... that the noise is shorter than the tail? I’m honestly not so picky.”

The girl at the front desk laughs. Molly feels her cheeks glowing, and fixes her gaze on the floor until she realises that the laughter wasn’t meant to mock her.

“It’s generally only old school boards or cruisers that have shorter noses,” the girl explains. “These boards have roughly the same nose and tail length, that way it’s simpler to skate switch stance or land fakie. Don’t worry about it.”

“Witch stance and fake ehm?” Mumbles Molly.

The girl looks at Molly for a few seconds before blinking as if to snap out of her thoughts:

“I'll find you something that works.”

She turns and looks around the boards on the shelves.

“I reckon this one will be good for you,” she says and reaches out over the counter holding out a purple and pink board.

Molly takes the skateboard. There is a symbol on the bottom of the board, just like the female toilet doors at school. GIRL .., it says in large, turquoise letters. The surface on top is black and rough, like it has been covered with rough sandpaper.

“That’s a decent board,” the girl says. “The grip tape is nicely broken in, and it there is still plenty of pop in the nose and tail.”

“Thanks.” Mumbles Molly turning back towards the skatepark with the board under her arm.

An amazing feeling is welling up inside of her. If only Mikey and Sophie could see her now.

Chapter seven

GOOFY OR REGULAR?

“Hi, Molly!” Shouts Mum from the kitchen as Molly opens the front door. “How was football training?”

Molly catches sight of herself in the mirror and breaks into a wide smile. Her hair is hanging in wavy locks around her face, that shape it takes whenever it is damp. Her cheeks have little streaks of dirt. Dust from the skatepark is stuck to her eyebrows, and there are black flecks around her nose. It reminds her of those times when she was working on the tree house. Her fingertips feel strange too, especially the thumb and forefingers where the grip tape has scraped on her skin. Molly hurries into the downstairs bathroom to splash water on her face from the tap. She knows that she should have a bad conscience for dropping football training, but she can’t help but feel so great inside.

It was so much fun standing on a board, and all those girls were so nice to her. It was incredible getting so much encouragement, even though she was so clumsy. Danni, and that other girl Rianne, seemed genuinely glad to have Molly there, despite them being much older, and really good at skating. Danni and Rianne switched about as instructors. Danni showed her where to place her feet: Front foot over the bolts, back foot on the tail.

Keeping her balance was much harder than it looked. Then there were all these new words and expressions to learn. She giggles thinking about the time Danni asked her which foot she wanted forwards on the board. After jumping on a few times, Molly was in no doubt: her left foot felt best.

“If you stand with your left foot forwards you skate regular,” Danni explained. “Nearly just as many skaters use their right foot forward. That’s called Goofy. It is the same as snowboarding.”

GOOFY? Like the cartoon character. Everything was so new. The best part of all though, was that Molly never once felt that the other girls thought she was hopeless.

“Cool, Molly,” Danni had said.“You're regular like me.”

Those hours in the skatepark went by in a flash. Time hadn’t flown like that in a long time. Eventually, Molly had completely forgotten to think about football training or her drawing course. To stand on the board and balance while rolling, took all of her focus. When Molly went to hand the skateboard back, the girls said they hoped to see her at Girl Skate next week too. It sounded like they really meant it. Something like that would never have happened at football training. No one bothered to spend time explaining what things are called, how the positions work around the pitch, or which players and teams to look out for. They expected you to know.

Molly tears off some toilet paper, dampens it, and wipes around behind her neck. Even there she is finding black streaks.

She notices a feeling of elation is bubbling up inside her. She can’t wait to tell Mum and Dad, and especially Mikey. She doubts he knows anything about the indoor skatepark. He doesn’t even know that boards with shorter noses than tails are from the olden days. Molly hurries towards the kitchen buzzing full of a new energy. She opens her mouth to begin her planned victory speech as she takes in the scene at the dinner table, but the moment she sees Mikey’s face, the words get stuck in her throat.

“Molly's team has to win the next game, right?”

Mikey and Dad share a long meaningful look of raised eyebrows, before Mikey finally sticks the fork in his mouth. What was that look? Why was he such a creep? He's going to destroy everything. Of course, he knows that Molly dropped training. That won’t go down well with Mum and Dad. Molly has to play football all season long. That was their *condition* to pay for the drawing course.

“Well, the most important thing right now, is that all the players stick at it. It’s wonderful to finally have a propper girls team up and running,” says Dad before he taking a big sip of water.

“But the cup is an important trophy,” says Mikey. “They should go all out to win it, right?”

“Yes of course,” says Mum. “That would really put the Harriers Girls on the map. To reach the quarterfinals in their first season would certainly be something to be proud of. Not least because your sister is on the team.”

Mum lifts her glass of water and nods, as if to say “cheers.”

Molly stands there watching the family sitting around the table. Mum and Dad smile at her, their eyes are bright with anticipation. When the topic of conversation is football, they get so emotional. No matter how much enthusiasm Molly has for her new found passion, it won’t help her now. Skateboarding is bound to be badly received. Could she handle disappointing her parents right now? Her enthusiasm is doomed. She envisages Mum getting upset and shouting, while Dad will blankly refuse to understand. Molly can imagine Mum’s words; ‘You are such a quitter, young lady. What about the team, and letting down all of your friends?’ Dad will get serious and act all hurt; ‘We had a deal.’

Molly cuts off her happy thoughts, and pushes them deep into her stomach.

“It’s very exciting, and I believe this team have what it takes,” says Dad. “Think about it, they’ve only been playing since the summer, and already they have come a long way. Soon they will have their own strips. It’s all coming together! It will be nice not having to wear the old shorts you inherited from the boys' team, right Molly?”

“I put an envelope in your room,” Mum is smiling. “Put the money from the cookie sales in it. It must be fun, going from door to door, and acting as a role model for girls football, hmm?”

Molly blinks. Role model? For football? There is no way can tell them what happened today. Of course not. Molly tucks her sweaty hair behind her ears, and attempts her best acting yet; a smile that shows in her eyes.

“Yeah fun, and it went so much better with training today.”

She clears her throat.

“I guess I’ve cracked the code, or something. It was the best Monday I’ve had in a long time.”